opportunity to reflect

The Lighter Side of the Ministry
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Introduction:

I'm flattered that you should be interested in hearing more of me. One of the hazards of the professional ministry is that we all will be drowned in a flood of words. A preacher with any sensitivity at all is humbly and painfully aware that his people listen to him speaking more than they listen to anyone else: probably more than they listen to each other. I did some quick mathematics and discovered some suprising data. I preach about forty times a year: each sermon lasts in the vicinity of twenty minutes. That's 800 minutes a year - or 13⅓ hours. We are about at the end of our ~~third~~ 11th year together: which means that if you are a regular attender you have heard 2,400 minutes - or ~~40⅓~~ 146 hrs 40 min hours. Now that, relatively speaking, is an immense amount of verbieage. It compares favorably with Walter Cronkite or Howard Cossel. The recent Nixon interviews, for instance, began at the level a preaching minister achieves annually - but they were edited, refined and distilled to a mere six hours or so. But more important than the quality of time is the quality.

Mr. Cronkite ~~has the advantage of his~~ monologue is broken up by commercials. You have the advantage of being able to get up and go to the kitchen for a sandwich: or, if you find him offensive or, at least dull, you can simply turn him off - something no worshipper has yet been able to do with the preacher. Rather, the setting for our exchange is quite formal and rigid: you can not move around very much: we have not yet introduced commercial breaks in the middle of a sermon, nor can you get up and go to the kitchen for refreshments: and unless you are very imaginative and can devise a new way to count the plaster decorations or the carved pomegranits in the chancel, you don't really have any alternative in church

but to listen.

And so I'm flattered that you should voluntarily subject yourselves to more. I shall not, however, preach a sermon: although a preacher has trouble not preaching. My children will testify to the fact that I can preach on any subject - at the dinner table - at the drop of a fork.

I would, on the other hand, like to begin with a text of sorts. It is a question that has been posed to each of my children many times. It is asked by their friends - when they are talking about what their fathers do for a living. My children's companions announce - "my Dad's a lawyer, a doctor, a salesman: " my child retorts "my Dad's a minister". And inevitably the question comes: "no - what does he do? What is his work? how does he earn a living?" My children - while they know I'm not around much, do have difficulty answering that and resort ordinarily to that great American panacea - "whatever it is, he's very busy!"

What I do professionally began when I decided, along with my wife, to go to graduate school and learn how to do it.

The lighter side of my ministry began at the outset, wnen I decided to go learn how to be one. And at the risk of boring you to tears I should like to tell you a little about it. Besides, if you can endore 40½ hours in the pews, surely you can make it through another few minutes.

We laugh a lot when we look back. We drove to Chicago from Altoona, Pennsylvania in September of 1959 - with all our wordly possessions crammed into two cars. Sue was very pregnant at the time. We arrived at Lake Shore Drive precisely at 5:00 p.m. on the day the White Sox won their first and last, A. L. Pennant in many decades. The experience was traumatic enough to cast grave doubt on the future. We may not have been the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock - but we were at least as frightened as they. I found myself

confronting a big city - the University of Chicago - and parenthood - totally unprepared for any of them. Although I came to love them all.

We were assigned to an apartment - which certainly stretches the language to the breaking point. Actually it was the living room and dining room of what was once a lovely residence in Hyde Park. Six other couples shared the house: because we were about to become parents we were awarded 2 rooms. The choicest apartment was the old kitchen: it had a stove and sink. Our kitchen was a corner - with an ancient, wheezing refrigerator and hot plate. Water had to be carried from the bath tub. In order to pay for this extravagance I labored as a janitor in an office building every night: and Sue worked as a secretary up to the day Diane was born.

It was fun but we didn't know it at the time. Academically, I found myself in a very rarified atmosphere. Every other student, it seemed, was there to earn a Ph. D. in Semitic languages or the "Origins of Existentialism from Augustine to Hegel." Everyone knew Paul Tillich and Reinbold Niebuhr personally - and shortly after a perfunctory introduction would announce grandly, "I'm Tillichian, what are you?" I always wanted to answer that by saying "I rather like the Pittsburgh Pirates myself." In any event it didn't take me long to learn the required German phrases which mark one as a theologian - Weltenschaung - Helisgeschicte - Sitz im Leben - I found myself in an institution that wanted me to think, and seemed blithly unaware of the fact that my major question was - "How do you preach a sermon?" We never, by the way, got around to that at Chicago - although they taught me the fancy word to describe it ~~showed I even~~ once I learned how to do it - Hermaneutics. Homiletics - based on your hermaneutic?

Diane arrived: I did well: Sue mothered: during the summer I worked two jobs: all day and every night. But we became restless - mostly with

the kind of communal living which occurs in graduate student apartment buildings. We had been moved into a new one. The halls were full of people - communicating - practicing new counseling skills on one another. It was at the very beginning of the human potential movement - and it seemed to me that every casual conversation had to become something called a "significant encounter."

The second stage of my preparation for ministry began on a hot August day when I noticed on the bulletin board a slip of paper which read - "Wanted - Student Pastor: $50 per week and parsonage: Dyer, Indiana. We drove the thirty miles South that might. Two weeks later, having distilled my first year of theology into a twenty minute sermon - which included an outline of Christian thought from the first to the twentieth century, the history of Europe, and sound resolutions for every current political and economic problem, I got the job and we moved in.

In anticipation of our new affluence we opened a charge account and purchased a studio couch, chair, table and lamp; and from the Semi bought a used bed, dresser and desk. Our only other item of furnishing was Sue's parents' first television set: 3 feet high, two wide, 250 lbs. with an 8 in. screen. We sat in the living room of that tiny house in Dyer and laughed at the richness of it all.

But the greatest crisis of my life was just three days away - Sunday. I had to come up with another sermon - and lead worship. If there were churches out there expecting men to do these things, the faculty at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago had not discovered that fact yet. I was totally unprepared. But I did it - with infinite love and support from Sue - and from that small Communion of Saints and Martyrs. I did it for six years.

In fact, as I look back, it was easier then. After a week in class I would close the door to the room which contained desk, typewriter and mimeograph, on Friday night and emerge early Saturday morning with a sermon. During the day Sue would type it - and prepare the bulletins, the folding of which constituted our regular Saturday night entertainment.

In Dyer, 3 weeks after I arrived, I conducted a funeral, never before in my life having attended one. My weekling offerings were sophomoric, ill-imformed, ill-prepared and sometimes arrogant. I am embarrassed even to think about them. But they were received with kindness and forgiveness and love - which is one of the clearest miracles of grace I know of.

It was our only experience with a manse. The dear people were generous, but broke. They owned the house because their former treasurer, who used to own it, had skipped town with $5,000 they had saved. The electric water pump broke down daily: the water softener through which ~~caused~~ caused liquid iron ore, leaked constantly, the oil furnace leaked - until even our clothes smelled like a Calumet refinery. In the winter the entire backyard flooded - whichwas fun for ice skating, but the toilets wouldn't flush.

Susan was born on the night of July 15, 1961, two weeks early, making her approach while I was in Comiskey Park watching the Yankees beat the White Sox, 1 -0, on a Whitey Ford shut out and a Mantle Home Run. A neighbor took Sue to the hospital and then, miraculously, caught me at Stoney Island and 85th, on my way home - and in time to catch Sue on her way to the delivery room.

We [redacted]. That little church endured in spite of me - and grew and became a Presbyterian New Church Development - and built a lovely new

building - and is now a thriving congregation. We remained there for six years, - three after my ordination and I learned most of what I know about my profession from them.

Two things mainly -

1. Christian people are patient, gentle, tolerant and essentially want to care for one another if the man they pay to be their minister will let them.

2. The Secretary of State, Attorney General and Supreme Court Justices are not ordinarily in the congregation on Sunday Morning, and sermons pointed to them, regardless of their erudition, will rarely find their target.

Enough of that: this is beginning to feel like a coerced viewing of the family album. What grew in me through that experience was a deep love of the Church and sense that in this, as in any human endeavor, there is plenty to laugh at and enjoy. I learned, I think, the grace of humor and the fact that to take oneself too seriously, all the time, is perhaps the deadliest sin of all. God, I am thoroughly convinced, has a sense of humor - and when he isn't weeping over us, is chuckling at our pomposity. I take altogether seriously the Westminster Devines suggesion that our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Part II

One of the burdens of the ministry is the image which it bears. I find it also the source of humor and some rich vignettes which are precious to me. I've already mentioned the fact that children - and adults - think of the minister in terms of Sunday only.

Another aspect of the public image is the traditional, pious, grim and straight countenance peering from portraits of stern puritan preachers.

Several weeks ago, in this Sanctuary, a mother brought her small child to worship - - - as I stepped into pulpit, lights dimmed

Is that Jesus? no

Is that God? no

Where is God? Shhhhh - he isn't here this morning.

Ministers are supposed to be pure, unstained by the world: untouched by the commoness of life. Now, I've played on athletic teams, lived in a Fraternity House, worked for the Altoona Sewer Depart,ent, on the Assembly line of a Ford automobile stamping Plant, and on a Road Construction gang. There is no profanity in the English language I have not heard used as comfortably and naturally as polite dinner table talk. Yet, when I , or any minister, walks into a barbership, that last bastion of male chauvinism, the barber, inevitably, says - loudly - Hello Reverend! It's an announcement, actually: ("clean it up, fellas, the Holy Man is here.") In spite of the fact that until you've worked for a municipal sewer department you haven't even heard profanity.

Older images which have their source in Puritanism, I suppose, continue to surface. 40 ~~10~~ years ago it was risky business for a clergyman to wear bermuda shorts. Not long ago, Sue and I were at a wedding reception. We decided to dance - the way we learned in the 50's. We bumped into a sister of the bride;s mother, who having had a bit too much to drink, yelled in horror, "My God, it's the minister!" - Benefit Sexual Hist)

Charles Merrill Smith wrote a little book about it - How to Become a Bishop without Being Religious. It is a delightful parody with enough truth in it to be devastating.

Image - suggested Smith, is everything. You want to project - what people expect of their minister, and it is easy to do once one begins the

the project.

Attire - for instance - dark suits, cleverly made to look slightly out of style, available at church supply houses: ("who goes for counseling to a man in a sport coat?)

Automobile - it should say ("this is a thrifty, sober man who makes no rash decisions, whose money is not at the mercy of emotions, whose true values are spiritual who is not secuded by the trifling, the flashy and the frivilous!)

The Inhibited Life - no alcohol or tobacco; (if in presence of off color story, practice an embarassed frown

-no vigorous pleasure - croquet is best

Art and Literature for the Mange - keep chaste, innocuous books + magazines in sight; The Robe - Readers Digest

Time isn't safe anymore

Salman's Head of Christ or DaVince's Last Supper

Stained Glass Voice

Choosing the Clerical Wife - she must not be stylish, beautiful, if she is, it must be toned down

May I hasten to add - that this parody does not apply here - or to the Churches I have served -

But the image surfaces - mostly outside the church - and it is one in which I continue to see humor.

I know of no profession more interesting and versatile and stimulating than the ministry. More often than not I go home at night with adrenalin still flowing and slightly amazed at what my job has allowed me to do. We're not busier than others - that's a myth. But we are diverse - today, for instance:

at 7:30 a teacher

9:00 Staff meeting - people skills

10:30 Administration - Stewardship '78 - desk telephone

12:00 Lunch - Public Speaking

1:30 Hospital calls

3:30 Meeting about our Recording Process

4:30 Pre-marital counseling

6:00 Little League

8:15 TV Taping of Grief

I do not find that boring. I love it - and I find in it, among everything else, a great deal that is good and joyful and stimulating and fun.